

## **ARMENIAN CHRISTIANS IN JERUSALEM: 1700 YEARS OF PEACEFUL PRESENCE\***

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the presence of the Armenians in Jerusalem for the past 1700 years. This historical account sheds the light on the importance of Jerusalem for the Armenians, especially for the Armenian Church that was granted the authority to safeguard the Holy Places in the Holy Land with the Greek and Latin Churches. During the centuries, the Armenians survived all the conquests and were able to find all sorts of compromises with all the different powers that conquered Jerusalem. This study shows that the permanent presence is due to the wise religious authorities and the entire Armenian community who had no backing from super powers but they had their religious beliefs and their persistence in safeguarding the Holy Places of Christianity. The author takes the reader back in History by stopping at important events that shaped the history of the Armenians in the Holy Land.

**Key words:** Jerusalem, Armenians, Crusaders, Holy Land, St James Monastery, Old City, Armenian Quarter.

### **Introduction**

This paper comes at a time when Christians in Iraq and Egypt are being massacred in their churches, Christians in Nazareth are being forbidden to decorate a Christmas tree in public space, and Christians in Lebanon are seeking to preserve their political rights to safeguard their presence in their Homeland. At a time, when the Palestinian Authority is alerting the International Community of the danger of the continuous and ferocious settlement construction in East Jerusalem by the State of Israel, and at a time when Christians of the East are being silent on the fate of Jerusalem by leaving it in the hands of the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators, hoping that the United States will be the caretaker of the Christians of Jerusalem.

The Christians of the East are not unwelcomed guests in the Middle East. They are an inseparable part of the East. However, they are facing many chal-

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lenges to maintain their presence in the land of their ancestors.

This article on the Armenian presence in the Holy Land aims to contribute positively in the debate and discourse over the legitimacy and importance of the Christian presence in the Middle East, in a region where the line between politics and religion is blurry and almost non-existent.

The Armenians of the Middle East form a minority within a Christian Minority in the Arab World. Their presence does not date back to 1915, the year of the great genocide as some people believe. Armenians have been living in the Middle East for 1700 years especially in Jerusalem as it will be shown through this paper. Armenians nowadays are scattered all over the Middle East. They are present in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Egypt. The majority of these Armenians are Orthodox, while the rest are Catholics and Protestants. Armenians have had a positive impact in their societies for centuries. They are known to be hard workers, excellent craftsmen, and loyal citizens who are well integrated into the societies where they live. In addition they are active members of governmental institutions without causing conflict to these political systems.

### **The Armenian Presence in Jerusalem**

East Jerusalem, precisely the Old City of Jerusalem is divided into four quarters: Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Armenian. The Armenian quarter is the smallest quarter; it represents one sixth of the city. In the South-west part of the Old City, it can be accessed through the Zion gate and Jaffa gate. The Armenian Quarter is made up of two distinct sections: the Monastery of St. James, which covers roughly two-thirds of the quarter, and the residential quarters of the native Armenians. In 1998, it was estimated that there were 2500 Armenians left in Jerusalem<sup>2</sup>. The large majority of the community lives in the Old City and almost two-thirds in the monastery itself. They are called the *Vanketsi*. They pay symbolic rentals for apartments to the patriarchate. Armenians have always preferred to stay within the monastery walls, where secular life was well organized and many cultural and social services were provided in the compound of the Patriarchate itself. Moreover, life inside the walls of the Monastery gave the Armenians a feeling of security. "Twenty percent of the Jerusalemite Armenians live outside the walls of the monastery but still within the Armenian quarter."<sup>3</sup> They are called the *Kaghakatsi*.

St Tarkmanchatz School is the first co-educational (mixed school for boys and girls) school in the Old City of Jerusalem, and is attended by most of the Armenian children (around 200). The languages of instruction are Armenian, English,

2 Hagopian Harry, *The Armenian Church in the Holy Land*, Melisende Publishers, London, 2002, pp. 16.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

Hebrew and French. "The school is funded by Armenian philanthropists abroad as well as by local community contributions"<sup>4</sup>. Also, during the years, Armenians established their own social and cultural clubs in the quarter.

The Armenian Church in Jerusalem enjoys a special status as one of the three major guardians of the Christian Holy Places in the Holy Land, along with the Greek Orthodox and Latin-Roman Catholic Churches. The Armenian Church has sole jurisdiction over St James cathedral and the houses of Annas and Caiaphas and shares with other Christian churches control over the Holy Sepulcher, St Mary's Tome in Gethsemane, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

### **Armenia: the First Christian Nation**

The presence and consolidation of an Armenian community and Church in Jerusalem have taken years of hardship, religious beliefs and political compromises. The adoption of Christianity by Armenia as a State religion was the turning point in the attachment of Armenians to the Holy Land.

In 301 AD, King Trdat declared Christianity as the state religion of Armenia. As a result the first Christian State was born. This move gave the necessary momentum for the new Christians to head towards Jerusalem, to the City of Christ as fervent pilgrims.

During the Byzantine period, Armenian monks were among the most active in the desert of Palestine and Jerusalem to establish their presence. Among the most prominent monks was the Armenian monk Euthymius the pioneer Armenian monk who had "founded about fifteen monasteries in spectacular locations between Masada and Bethlehem. His career was thought to have launched a new era of humanity. In these monasteries, the monks planted gardens and fruit trees, making the desert bloom"<sup>5</sup>. "Armenian monks and pilgrims figured prominently among the inhabitants of this desert"<sup>6</sup>. Armenian pilgrimages flocked to Jerusalem and the Holy sites in "caravans of 400-500 people"<sup>7</sup>. Many of these pilgrims decided to stay in Jerusalem rather than returning home. These monks and pilgrims of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century formed the nucleus of the Armenian community of Jerusalem.

Since early Christian history, Armenians played an important role in influencing the rulers in their faith and imposing it in the political arena. For example, Karen Armstrong in her book *Jerusalem* mentions that in 444 AD, Empress

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4 Ibid., pp. 20.

5 Armstrong Karen, *Jerusalem One City, Three Faiths*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005, pp. 205

6 Bitton-Ashkelony Brouria, Pilgrimage in Monastic culture in late Antiquity, *The Armenians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, Roberta R. Ervine, Michael E. Stone and Nira Stone (eds), Hebrew University Armenian Studies, Belgium, 2002, p7.

7 Hintlian George, Armenians of Jerusalem, <http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org/ViewArticle.aspx?id=278> (accessed 4.1.2011).

Eudokia, the wife of Theodosius II of Constantinople, a convert to Christianity became the ruler of Jerusalem. During her rule, Eudokia was heavily involved in the doctrinal debate about the person and nature of Christ, and she was witnessing the confusion of the Church and the many interpretations that were spreading among the people. "In 457 AD she asked advice of the famous Syrian ascetic Simeon Stylites. He told her to consult Euthymius, the Armenian monastic leader, and Eudokia was so impressed by his teaching that she submitted to Orthodox doctrine. Jerusalem was to become a center of Nicene Orthodoxy."<sup>8</sup>

This episode gives a sense of the privileges the Armenians were gaining in this holiest city of Christians. However, the development of the Community and Church was not always smooth. The Greek Church supported by the Roman emperors was gaining more power and influence in Jerusalem while the Armenian Church with no backing (and Armenia losing its battles) was relegated to a secondary position.

It is only with the Muslim reign of the Second caliph Omar who conquered Jerusalem in 637 AD that the Armenians could come back as major players in the Holy Land. The caliph, who fought the Byzantine emperors, distrusted the Greeks. It "seemed to him that he could rely on the loyalty of the Armenians."<sup>9</sup> In return for the Armenian support, the Caliph issued a charter in 640 AD, elevating Bishop Abraham I to the position of Patriarch of Armenians of Jerusalem. Since then there have been uninterrupted successive regimes of patriarchs. In this same charter, Caliph Omar highlighted the rights and privileges of the Armenian Patriarchate over certain Holy Places which were crucial to maintain the integrity and to guaranty the safety of the properties and lives of the Armenians in Jerusalem. As a result of the tolerant nature of the Islamic rulers towards the Armenians and the apolitical nature of Armenians; Armenians gained the trust of the Arab rulers and developed close ties in several regions of the Arab empire.

They were granted special status in Egypt as well as in Jerusalem. Armenians settled in Egypt early in the Roman era. However, their numbers increased during the Fatimid rule, where it was known that many high ranking officials in the military and in the government were from Armenian descent.

It is said that during this period the Armenian population in Egypt numbered more than 30,000. It is believed that this was due to the fact that Armenians who were in key positions of leadership encouraged their countrymen to settle in countries ruled by the Fatimid Caliphs. This fact obviously enhanced the position of Armenians in the Holy Land. There is tangible evidence that the Armenian community had begun to congregate around the original site of the St. James Church and several churches and monasteries in the immediate vicinity on Mount Zion, which constituted the core of the Armenian Quarter as we know

8 Armstrong Karen, *Jerusalem One City, Three Faiths*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005 pp. 207- 208.

9 <http://www.holyland.org/> (Accessed 10.1.2011).

it today<sup>10</sup>

In almost 700 years the Armenians were able to transform their presence in the Holy Land from a few hundred enthusiastic pilgrims to legitimate inhabitants with a well protected and well-respected Patriarchate despite the continuous political changes in the region. Despite all regimes, Armenians were able to expand and consolidate their presence in the Holy Land.

The coming 1000 years in the history of Armenians in Jerusalem is full of challenges and victories which says a lot about this community.

## **Armenians, Crusaders and Jerusalem**

In 1095, Pope Urban II declared the Holy War of Liberation, urging the European knights to march towards Jerusalem to rescue the tomb of Christ from the Muslims. In 1096, "five armies of sixty thousand soldiers set off on the road to Jerusalem"<sup>11</sup> In 1080, the Cilician Armenia was founded, and established very close relations with European countries and later on it was to play "an important role during the Crusades, providing the Christian armies a safe heaven and provision on their way towards Jerusalem"<sup>12</sup>. The Armenians saw in the Frankish Crusaders, the adequate allies against the Greeks and Muslims who had brought the defeat of historical Armenia. They greeted the Franks as liberators. At that time, the Armenians in Cilicia were not aware that their alliance with the Crusaders would positively affect the Armenian community in the Holy Land.

## **The county of Edessa, the first Crusader State**

The first Crusader State was established in the Armenian County of Edessa in 1098, a year before the fall of Jerusalem in 1099 in the hands of the Crusaders. "Edessa was one of the largest of the Crusader states in terms of territory. However, it was one of the smallest by population. Edessa itself had about 10000 inhabitants, but the rest of the county consisted of fortresses."<sup>13</sup> The county's borders started from Antioch in the west to the Euphrates in the east; it extended in the north as far as Armenia proper, and to the south and east it bordered the Muslim cities of Aleppo and Mosul, and the Jazira. Edessa was a city with an ancient history and an early tradition of Christianity. Thoros the Armenian prince of Edessa, who did not have the power to withstand a Turkish attack on his own, appealed to the crusader Baldwin of Boulogne for help. Having no male chil-

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10 <http://www.holyland.org/> (accessed 10.1.2011).

11 Armstrong Karen, *Jerusalem One City, Three Faiths*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005, pp. 271-272

12 <http://www.un.int/wcm/webdav/site/armenia/shared/documents/historyofarmenia.pdf> (accessed 26.12.2010).

13 Tate Georges, *Noble Titles of the County of Edessa: Counts of Edessa, Baldwin I of Jerusalem, Baldwin II of Jerusalem, County of Edessa*, Books LLC, USA, 2010, p 13.

dren himself Thoros adopted Baldwin as his son, making him both heir and joint ruler. Baldwin married the prince's daughter Arda. After the suspicious death of Thoros, "Baldwin proclaimed himself count of Edessa in March 1098, founding the first crusader state."<sup>14</sup> He ruled the county until 1100 acting as an ambassador between the crusaders and Armenians".<sup>15</sup>

Later on Baldwin I, count of Edessa, became the first king of the kingdom of Jerusalem in December 25, 1100 after the death of his brother Godfrey, who was ruling Jerusalem but refused to be appointed as King. "The Armenians were especially favored since there were now Armenian members of the royal family. Baldwin had created a special link with Armenia, and the community and Convent of St James prospered. Important Armenian dignitaries and notables came to Jerusalem as pilgrims, bearing rich gifts: embroidered vestments, golden crosses, chalices, and crucifixes encrusted with precious stones, which are still used on major feast days, and illuminated manuscripts for the convent library. The Armenians were also given the custody of the Chapel of St. Mary in the Holy Sepulcher Church."<sup>16</sup>

The privileged position of the Armenians in Jerusalem increased during the whole period of the Crusaders. Till the fall of Jerusalem in the hands of Saladin, the rulers of the Kingdom of Jerusalem had close family ties with the Armenians, which facilitated and increased the travel of Armenians from and to Jerusalem.

Baldwin II, the cousin of Baldwin I was nominated count of Edessa when the latter was crowned King of Jerusalem. "As count, in 1101, Baldwin married Morphia of Melitene, the daughter of the Armenian prince Gabriel of Melitene."<sup>17</sup> and in 14 April 1118, Baldwin of Edessa "was crowned king of Jerusalem as Baldwin II on Easter Sunday".<sup>18</sup> Baldwin and Morphia had four daughters, and "in 1129, Baldwin named Melisende (the eldest of his four daughters) as his heir. And Melisende, by law the heir of the kingdom, succeeded her father with Fulk (her husband) as co-ruler. The new queen and king were crowned on 14 Sep 1131".<sup>19</sup>

Baldwin II and his daughter Melisende continued supporting the Armenian community and church in the Holy Land. They were their natural allies. The Armenian Church continued buying land and properties. They acquired much of the land in today's Armenian quarter and by 1165, they finished constructing St James Cathedral which was to become the most important building of the quarter. And it was during this same time that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher acquired its modern shape.

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14 Tate Georges, *The Crusades and the Holy Land*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996, pp 40.

15 Tate Georges, *Counts of Edessa: Baldwin I of Jerusalem*, Books LLC, USA, 2010, p 7.

16 Armstrong Karen, *Jerusalem One City, Three Faiths*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005, pp 270.

17 Tate Georges, *Counts of Edessa: Baldwin I of Jerusalem*, Books LLC, USA, 2010, pp 2.

18 *Ibid.*, pp 3.

19 *Ibid.*, pp 4.

## Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem and the Armenians

In 1187, Saladin entered Jerusalem. After almost 200 years of Christian reign, the Muslims re-entered the Holy City as conquerors. Post-Crusade Jerusalem was not a pleasant place for Christians to live in, especially for Latin Christians who were considered by Muslims the heirs of Crusaders. Saladin needed trusted allies in the Holy Land to secure its authority. The Latins were his number one enemies, and he was suspicious of Greeks, therefore, he found in the Armenians the trusted allies with which he could build relations. As Caliph Omar, Saladin extended the Armenians of the Holy Land with great privileges. And unlike the other Christians of the city, the Armenian population, monks and families, remained in their homes and were treated fairly. "Saladin granted the Armenian Patriarch a charter guaranteeing the security of all Armenians, the integrity of their possessions, the prerogative of keeping their Holy Places and the freedom to worship throughout his entire domain."<sup>20</sup> The Mamluk Sultan Al-Zahir Jaqmaq, who ruled between 1438 and 1453, reinforced the privileged position of the Armenians by issuing a special decree forbidding the emir of Jerusalem to burden them with unnecessary taxation. And to allow no confusion or mistakes, this decision/decreed was well engraved on a plaque at the western entrance to the Armenian Quarter to make it public to all.

Karen Armstrong, in her book *Jerusalem*, has been able to analyze accurately the reason why Armenians had been able to stand political and religious changes in the Holy Land, she writes:

"The Armenians had been closely involved with the Crusaders, but they had not followed them in uncritical and fanatical hatred of Islam. They had already learned not to take sides, and as a result, they were the only community that had remained in its own quarter without being dislodged during the upheavals of the previous three hundred years."<sup>21</sup>

Under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66), Jerusalem underwent great re-shaping and by 154, the city's walls were rebuilt. Jerusalem was properly fortified again, and the walls still stand till our days. Armenians continued prospering and building their quarter, always under the protection of the rulers, the Ottomans.

Armenians believed that constantly guaranteeing privileged standings would secure and reinforce their presence in the Holy Land. Therefore, the Armenian Patriarchate worked tediously to reaffirm the rights of the Armenians in Jerusalem. In 1856, during the Paris Peace Conference after the Crimean War, the Armenian Patriarchate was able to confirm its rights in the Holy Land. Again, during the Congress of Berlin in 1878, in the wake of the Russian-Ottoman war,

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20 <http://www.holyland.org/> (accessed 10.1. 2011).

21 Armstrong Karen, *Jerusalem One City, Three Faiths*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2005, pp 316.

the Armenian Patriarchate was able to obtain international support for its presence and influence in the Holy Land's holy sites. The Patriarchate was the sole representative of the Armenian Church in Jerusalem and of the Armenian population. It was in constant search for safety and security for its monks and people. It used regional and international arenas to remind super-powers involved in the politics of the region of the privileges of the Armenians.

"Of particular and vital significance is the firman of 25 July 1888 that was issued by Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid to the Armenian Patriarch Harootiun Vehabedian (1885-1910). This document re-affirmed the supreme authority of the Armenian Patriarch once again, and his seat in Jerusalem was declared once more as the seat of the Armenian Patriarchate of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, Gaza, Tripoli, Nablus, of the Abyssinians, the Copts and the other nationals'. This firman meant that the Patriarch was no longer relating directly to the local authorities but rather to the Sublime Porte. As such, the Patriarchate acquired its legal independence of any assembly in Constantinople or Jerusalem."<sup>22</sup>

### **The Ottomans and Armenians of Jerusalem**

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the Armenian community and church was confident and in a greatly privileged position. It had no constraints, nor pressures. The Church continued welcoming the thousands of pilgrims who had never stopped their holy visit to the Holy Land. Pilgrims came to Jerusalem in great numbers, "especially pilgrims from the Eastern Churches, of whom the Armenians were among the most enthusiastic"<sup>23</sup>. It was thanks to the pilgrims that the Armenian Church grew, it depended on them for its income. It was thanks to the concentrated efforts of Jerusalem's Armenian Patriarch Grigor Paronter (1613-1645) that pilgrimage to Jerusalem by Armenians first became an organized business."<sup>24</sup> The Patriarch ordered the creation of stopover stations all along the major pilgrimage routes from the Ottoman and Persian Empires to Jerusalem. He sent delegates to the different Armenian communities, to encourage them to travel to the Holy Land during Easter and Christmas. These delegates were in charge of organizing the caravans' trips into Jerusalem. He opened the Monastery of St James and trained the personnel to accommodate, to cater and to offer good services to the pilgrims. The Patriarch Krikor, the Chainbearer, between the years 1719 and 1749 "turned Sts James into a self-sufficient institution with accommodation for over 300 pilgrims who, as

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22 Ibid.

23 Ervine Roberta, Changes in Armenian Pilgrim attitudes Between 1600 and 1857: The Witness of Three Documents, *The Armenians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, Roberta R. Ervine, Michael E. Stone and Nira Stone (eds), Hebrew University Armenian Studies, Belgium, 2002, pp 81.

24 Ibid., pp 82-83.

in the previous century, would arrive at Easter or Christmas. Monastery personnel would take care of their needs for food, bedding, utensils, and housing during their stay<sup>25</sup>. The Church had developed a sort of a guidebook intended to “persuade the faithful Armenian living in Central Anatolia or some other distant part of the Ottoman Empire that it was worthwhile to undertake the Jerusalem pilgrimage.”<sup>26</sup>

According to the narratives of the bishop in his guidebook, he states clearly that the Armenian Patriarchate had concluded agreements with the “royal government” (i.e. the Ottoman government) to guarantee a “safe passage with military escort to Jerusalem”<sup>27</sup> in return for a landing tax of seven ghurush collected in Jaffa.

### **Improvements of St James Monastery**

Patriarch Hovanes, elected in 1850, worked for 10 years on improving the monastery. The below accounts for the shrewd nature of the Patriarchate leaders and it shows the attachment of the Armenians to their quarter and to their lives in the Holy Land:

He [Patriarch Hovanes] “had built the present Patriarchate building, with its remarkable arch across the road, joining the property within the monastery walls to the patriarchal garden and the property adjacent to the city ramparts. The preparation of for the building’s construction had taken three years; thanks to a civil regulation, which allowed any building that could be put up in one night to stand without a previous building permit, patriarch Hovanes had the structure carefully prefabricated in marked blocks, so that an exceptionally large crew of masons could put it together in a single night. It was a stroke of genius on his part, but the planning and the costs were very taxing to the nerves of the monastic community.”<sup>28</sup>

Also, the Patriarch built “the area later known as the Cypress Quarter just inside the southwest corner of the monastery complex, whose forty-five rooms would house the students of the Jerusalem Armenian seminary until the 1960s. In 1856, he was laying the groundwork for the erection of a classroom building for the seminary, completed in 1857 and located just east of the Cypress Quarter. In the same year, the Patriarch purchased for the monastery the property lying between Mamilla and Jaffa road, as well as the area near Ein Kerem called Philip’s Well.”<sup>29</sup>

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25 Ibid., pp 84.

26 Ibid., pp 84.

27 Ibid., pp 85.

28 Ibid., pp 91.

29 Ibid., pp 92.

Mid nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was in decline which affected tremendously the areas under its rule, and among the affected regions was Jerusalem. Poverty was getting more significant, pilgrims were becoming rare. Politics was changing, alliances were created and people's perception towards their religion was distorted. They wanted the Church to provide help without giving back to the Church. The monastery had difficulties to accept this change in people's mood. And so, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Monastery stopped its involvement in catering and accommodating pilgrims. However, not long after, the Armenian Patriarchate had to open its doors again to Armenians who were desperately in need for shelter.

### **The Genocide and the Israeli-Arab conflict**

In 1915, the Armenian Church of Jerusalem welcomed the Armenian refugees in its monastery to protect them from further persecution. After the end of World War I in 1918, once again, the Armenian Church in Jerusalem used the international arena to strengthen its presence in the region with the new rulers. They sent a delegation which included Archbishop Yeghishe Tourian, future Patriarch of Jerusalem, to the Versailles Treaty Conference in 1919 "to ensure recognition and acceptance of the Ottoman Status Quo, which they did. In 1922, the Palestine Order in Council again reaffirmed the Status Quo, adding: "It is well understood that no alteration can be made on the Status Quo of the Holy Places."<sup>30</sup>

By 1921, through the British Mandate, tension and violence were high. However, the Armenian community in the Holy Land enjoyed a period of rejuvenation and growth socially, culturally, and religiously. Armenians under the guidance of the Patriarchate continued their traditional way of living refusing to be involved in the struggles around them, retaining their age-old custom of apolitical behavior by maintaining their neutrality, and avoiding participating in the political conflict between the Arab and Jewish communities.

"During 1948, out of a total of 10,000 residents left in the Old City, 6,000 were Armenians."<sup>31</sup> The Armenian Quarter suffered considerable damage from the shelling of the Old City. Forty civilians lost their lives and another 250 were wounded. "Just like the Palestinian Arabs of 1948, many Armenian families lost their homes to the advancing Israeli army in Jerusalem only to find themselves refugees once more. The church devoted much of its resources to accommodate over 4,000 new refugees."<sup>32</sup> When Israel declared its independence in May 1948, those Armenians who stayed in Jaffa, Haifa, or Ramleh obtained the Israeli

30 <http://www.holyland.org/> (accessed 10.1.2011).

31 Hintlian George, Fact file: Armenians of Jerusalem, Jerusalem Quarterly File, Issue 2, 1998 <http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org/ViewArticle.aspx?id=278> (accessed 4.1.2011).

32 Hagopian Harry, *The Armenian Church in the Holy Land*, Melisende Publishers, London, 2002, pp 13.

citizenship, while the Armenians of the Old City remained under the Jordanian administration. Peaceful coexistence with the Arabs alongside the preservation of cultural-linguistic identity was a model of success for the Christian Armenians.

In 1967, Israel occupied East Jerusalem. After 2000 years the Jews re-entered to the Holy City. It was a historic moment for the Jewish people but the hard times were to begin for the existing communities in the Old City. The Armenian Patriarchate had seen many conquerors, cooperated with different politics with great success for the past long centuries of its presence in the Holy Land. However, the church and the community are having difficulties dealing with the new rulers of Jerusalem. "The Armenian Patriarchate has lost several plots of land in Jerusalem through confiscation. All the land below the western side of the ramparts from outside the walls to the old Fast Hotel was confiscated for so-called public purposes. The Armenian Patriarchate, like other institutions, has great difficulty obtaining building permits. Work on the Armenian Church on Mt. Zion has been delayed for 20 years due to denial of building permits. In the Armenian Quarter settlers have tried several times to buy property, without success."<sup>33</sup>

However, due to its long and respected presence, and again because of the wisdom of the religious leaders, the Patriarchate managed to tie good working relationship with the Israeli government which made it possible to build "a new seminary complex within the Old City walls. It also allowed the patriarchate to restore All Saviours' Church situated beyond the wall in the Armenian portion of the former no-man armistice land that divided at the time the Old City and the New City and marked the frontier between Israel and Jordan."<sup>34</sup>

"Every newly-elected Armenian Patriarch must obtain the formal and written approval of the Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian authorities."<sup>35</sup>

The Armenian Patriarchate has been affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has to deal with its Israeli and Palestinian Armenian communities at the same time. While it has to make compromises with the Israeli government to preserve its stance in the Holy Land, it cannot stay neutral to the sufferings of its Armenian Palestinian community. Therefore, during the intifada and whenever needed, the Armenian Patriarchate takes firm positions on human rights and justice issues affecting the Palestinian people. "Before and during the intifada there were scores of Armenian youth arrested in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jerusalem. Haroutune Gulezian, an Armenian youth, was martyred while leading a demonstration in August 1991 in Ramallah. He is buried in the Armenian cemetery in Jerusalem."<sup>36</sup>

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33 Hintlian George, Fact file: Armenians of Jerusalem, Jerusalem Quarterly File, Issue 2, 1998 <http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org/ViewArticle.aspx?id=278> (accessed 4.1.2011).

34 Ibid.,

35 Hagopian Harry, *The Armenian Church in the Holy Land*, Melisende Publishers, London, 2002, pp 19.

36 Hintlian George, Fact file: Armenians of Jerusalem, Jerusalem Quarterly File, Issue 2, 1998 <http://www.jerusalemquarterly.org>.

The Armenians arrived to Jerusalem 1700 years ago as fervent believers seeking to enforce their belief in the Holy Land. But nowadays, Jerusalem does not represent the spiritual interests of Armenians only. It also represents their physical interests since it houses a community with assets and properties all over the city. "Despite its small congregation, the Armenian church is the second largest landowner in the Old City with substantial holdings in the Israeli coastal city of Jaffa and in West Jerusalem where it owns much of the central shopping district. Hence the on-going Israeli-Palestinian negotiations over the status of the City, and particularly over the one-square-kilometer plot of land, have become of vital importance for Armenians."<sup>37</sup>

The Armenian quarter of Jerusalem survived for as long as 1700 years, witnessing different conquerors and various religions. It had to deal with powerful rulers. The latest battle of the Armenian Patriarchate was in the year 2000. During the Camp David negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians in July 2000 "Israel had insisted that it had the right to exercise full sovereignty over the whole area of the Old City. It was willing to grant administrative control to the Palestinians over the Muslim and Christian Quarters only, meaning that the Armenian Quarter would have been annexed with the Jewish Quarter under complete Israeli sovereignty and administration."<sup>38</sup> When the negotiation outcomes were publicized, the president of the Palestinian Authority at that time Yasser Arafat denounced the Israeli offer, rejecting it totally.

The Church leaders strongly repudiated the Israeli proposal "that would weaken the Christian presence in the city and asked to be involved in the future discussions impacting the Old City."<sup>39</sup>

And in 17 July 2000, the three Patriarchs of Jerusalem, namely Their Beatitudes Diodoros I (Greek Orthodox), Michael Sabbah (Latin) and Torkom II (Armenian Orthodox) addressed a letter to US president, Israeli Prime Minister and President of the Palestinian Authority suggesting a solution for the Holy Land:

"We appeal to you as foremost political leaders and negotiators to ensure that the Christian communities within the walls of the old city are not separated from each other". As a possible solution the Church leaders suggested the creation of a system of international guarantees that will ensure to the three religious communities a quality of right of access to their respective holy places of profession of faith and of development."<sup>40</sup>

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org/ViewArticle.aspx?id=278 (accessed 4.1.2011).

37 Hagopian Harry, *The Armenian Church in the Holy Land*, Melisende Publishers, London, 2002, pp 28.

38 *Ibid.*, pp 29.

39 *Ibid.*, pp 29.

40 *Ibid.*, pp 31.

## **The Future of Armenians in Jerusalem: a quarter without people for a people without a quarter**

Many Armenians fear that the Israeli territorial expansion in the Old City will be in the direction of the Armenian Quarter. While the author is writing these lines, Al Jazeera, the Qatari based television has been airing for days secret documents of ten years of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authorities. Conceding parts of the Armenian Quarter had been put on the table of negotiations and accepted by the Palestinian authorities (according to the leaked documents). Once again, The Armenian Church and Community are faced with vital issues related to their survival that they have to solve with their historic wisdom without the backing of a super power. For years the Armenians in Jerusalem fought their battles for their existence and survival with success. What they are facing nowadays, is the ferocious extremism of the Jewish inhabitants in the Old City who do proclaim that the Armenian quarter is a land without people for a people without land. The numbers of the Jews in the Jewish quarter is growing compared to the shrinking number of the Armenians in their quarter which is next to the Jewish quarter.

Armenians in East Jerusalem are Palestinian citizens and they are facing the same difficulties the Palestinians are facing in the Old City. The Palestinians are losing their battle against Israel because of the historical Arab mismanagement of the conflict. The fear of the Armenians is that if the case is left to the Palestinian or Arab negotiators, the whole of East Jerusalem will be lost soon.

The situation is critical, Israel has austere measures in East Jerusalem against the non-Jews and it is more relaxed towards its Jewish citizens. They are changing the demography of the Old City by encouraging Jewish settlement. Armenians are being pressured to move from their homes in East Jerusalem, the population has difficulties finding jobs and living in a tense situation is becoming unbearable, which is forcing them to leave their homeland to immigrate to Canada or the US just like their Christian counterparts in the rest of the Middle East.

Moreover, for years Palestinians in Jerusalem and in the Occupied Territories have been cut off from the rest of the Arab region. After the Khartoum Summit in 1967 which followed the six-day War, the Arab leaders adopted the Three No's: No peace with Israel, No recognition of Israel, No negotiations with Israel. The direct consequence of these policies was to cut off the Palestinians from their Arab counterparts. The Armenians were also cut off from the Armenians in the Arab region. They had become imprisoned. The consequence of the "No Policy" on the Palestinians as a whole was disastrous. After more than sixty years, the facts on the ground show that these policies were not the best policies to ensure the rights of the Palestinian people and to regain the land. On the contrary the Palestinians have lost much of their land, and the refugees are still refugees and they might turn into eternal refugees.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Arabs declared war on Israel, they launched a resistance movement, they used diplomacy, they engaged themselves in a long and tiring peace process and the result is null, which is giving a certain feeling of incapacity, lassitude and pessimism that not much will change in the Middle East and the conflict will not be resolved very soon. In the meantime, many from all sides of the conflict are paying a high price; amongst these are the Christians in the Holy Land and in the rest of the Arab region. Therefore, to save the presence of the Christian minorities in the Middle East, in their historical homeland, the decision makers and leaders (religious and secular) have to think beyond the conflict, and think of unthinkable measures. The parameters of the past sixty years have become archaic. In that respect, the author of this article is proposing an option that is hard to be accepted by many at this time but it could be an opportunity for change, and for "doing things differently". Bringing back the equation of destroying Israel to save the Palestinians, which is being promoted by many extremist groups in the region will lead to more disastrous consequences on the Palestinians. For years in the name of the safeguard of Palestinian rights, Arabs have shut down on the Palestinians of the "inside" which gave the Israelis the freedom to suppress and destroy the Palestinian population by confiscating the land, and denying the basic rights.

The author is proposing a plan to encourage the Armenians and the Christians in general to strengthen their presence in the Middle East. The attachment to the land is a primordial notion for the people of the Holy Land. Jews from around the world support Israel because of what the land of Israel means to them. Thousands of Jews decide to head back to settle in Israel because of their attachment to the land. The same applies to the Christians of the Middle East. The source of attachment of the Christians to this land will be strengthened when the idea of belonging to the land is empowered in them. Therefore, as long as the Christians of the Middle East are not able to enter Jerusalem and be in contact with the Holy Places, they will keep on losing faith in the importance of their presence in the region. They will find it more conducive to live in Canada or the United States. The feeling that the Christians of the Middle East are able to maintain the Holy Places in the Holy Land is a tremendous incentive to stay in their Land.

In that regard, the author is suggesting the endorsement of the "Passage of Faith" Operation by the Leaders of the Eastern Churches to keep the Christians of the Middle East in their homeland.

The goal of the "Passage of Faith" is to allow free access to the Holy Places in Jerusalem for the Christians of the Middle East. It is a long and ambitious endeavor, for some it might be insane. However, the path of faith is never rational. It is an ambitious process of advocacy that involves decision makers in the Middle East, Europe and the United States to convince them to endorse such a bold

move. This outreach to decision makers will take around two years of hard work and wise planning. After the consent of all parties involved, 1000 Christians should be able to visit Jerusalem's Holy Sites during the first year of implementation, as a first step. If successful, the next stage would be to allow Christians to enter the Palestinian Territories to visit the Holy sites.

The "Passage of Faith Operation" is multi-leveled. It is a huge operation that involves a great number of human power, diplomatic skills, military awareness and most importantly faith; in helping Christians of the Middle East to re-connect with the land of Christ. The author has a detailed plan for execution and is more than willing to share with those interested in the matter. However, this goes beyond the scope of this article therefore, the author will not detail the "Passage of Faith" Operation phases.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the presence of the Armenians in the Holy Land for the past 1700 years. Since the declaration of the Christian Nation in 301 AD, Armenians have been travelling and settling in Jerusalem. Over the years they have managed to consolidate their presence by establishing religious and secular community and building their Quarter with perseverance of a fervent believers and the wisdom of their leaders. They were recognized as one of the three custodians of the Holy Places in the Holy Land. Faith led them to Jerusalem, and socio-economic and political interests have driven them to fight for their deep-rooted presence and to refuse to surrender to mighty powers. Irrespective of the limited support from the power brokers in Jerusalem, Armenians have successfully co-existed with the other religious and ethnic communities because of their devout faith.

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**Лаури Хајтајан**

## **ЈЕРМЕНСКИ ХРИШЋАНИ У ЈЕРУСАЛИМУ: 1700 ГОДИНА МИРНОГ ПРИСУСТВА**

### **Резиме**

Овај рад испитује присуство Јермена у Јерусалиму током последњих 1700 година. Као историјско штиво, показује значај који Јерусалим има за Јермене, нарочито за јерменску цркву, којој је дато овлашћење да са латинском и грчком црквом штити света места у Светој земљи. Током векова, Јермени су преживели сва освајања и били кадри да пронађу све врсте компромиса са свим силама које су походиле Јерусалим. Ова студија показује да је њихово перманентно присуство последица мудрости верских власти и читаве јерменске заједнице која није имала потпору суперсила, али је имала своја религијска уверења и истрајност у очувању хришћанских светиња. Аутор читаоца води на путовање у прошлост заустављајући се код важних догађаја који су обликовали историју Јермена у Светој земљи.

**Кључне речи:** Јерусалим, Јермени, Крсташи, Света земља, Манастир Св. Јакова, стари град, јерменска четврт.

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